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ABSTRACT

During the last two decades learning communities, which are felt to have benefits that extend beyond students to faculty and the institution, have expanded to include many different models. This digest reviews five major higher education learning community models currently in existence: (1) Linked courses, which link cohorts of students taking two courses in common with one course typically content-based and the other application-based. Faculty in each course may teach independently or together; (2) learning clusters where instead of linking two courses together, a student cohort is linked in three or four courses, which often serve as the students' entire course load; (3) freshmen interest groups (FIGs), which are linked around academic majors and include a peer-advising component that allows students to discuss course work and other college adjustment problems. Faculty play a lesser role in FIGs; (4) federated learning communities, the most complex of the models, in which a cohort of students takes three theme-based courses in addition to a three-credit seminar taught by a Master Learner a professor from a different discipline who takes the courses and fulfills all class requirements along with the students; and (5) coordinated studies, in which faculty and students participate in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme. (CH)

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Learning Communities

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During the last two decades, higher education has focused on providing learning environments conducive to students participating in their own learning. Institutions have tried to find ways for students to actively participate with faculty members and to encourage them to build a support network, form friendships and connect with their institutions. Learning communities, in their various forms, have assisted higher education in providing these experiences.

WHAT ARE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The origin of learning communities dates back to 1927 when Alexander Meiklejohn formed the two-year Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. Students and faculty read and discussed classic Greek literature the first year and compared it to the contemporary American literature in the second-year. Students were required to connect these ideas and write a paper during the summer between the first and second years. Although this first attempt at a learning community was short-lived--only six years--it provided the foundation for the learning communities we know today.

Although learning communities in their basic form have existed in one form or another for over seventy years, their recent resurgence has expanded to include many different models. Learning communities intentionally restructure the curriculum to connect students and faculty in common courses, often including seminars or a peer advising component. According to Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith (1990, p. 19), "A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses--or actually restructure the curricular material entirely--so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise."

Learning communities help students link their academic work with active and increased intellectual interaction with each other and with faculty. Learning communities also promote coherence among students and create a sense of common purpose and community. Alexander Astin (1985, p. 161) in Schroeder & Mable (1994, p. 167) defines learning communities as "small subgroups of students . . .characterized by a common sense of purpose . . . that can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness, and uniqueness that encourage continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences."

MODELS

Currently, there are five major learning community models in existence. Many institutions find that choosing a single model is not as beneficial as using bits and pieces from two or three models. Each institution has its own mission and can design the learning communities that best fit that mission.

Linked Courses - This model links a cohort of students with two common courses. One course is typically content-based (science, math) and the other is an application course (writing, speech). The faculty of each course may teach independently or together and coordinate syllabi and assignments so that the classes compliment each other. The Linked Courses Model provides a shared experience for students that focuses on a content-based course that is actively supported by a skills course.

The University of Washington has a nationally recognized Interdisciplinary Writing Program in which students take an expository writing course that is linked with a general education lecture course. Students can choose up to 27 different general education courses. Instructors work together to generate ideas for assignments in the writing class based on the general education course. The community is formed in the small writing classes and students share a common identity and purpose while in the general education course.

Learning Clusters - The Learning Cluster Model is similar to the Linked Course Model except that instead of linking two courses together, three or four courses are linked with one cohort, often serving as the students' entire course load. However, in Learning Clusters, the courses are usually based on a theme, historical periods, issues, or problems. The degree to which the three or four faculty work together depends on the institution but can vary from common syllabi, joint assignments to team teaching. Often, Learning Clusters have a seminar component in which the students meet weekly or bi-weekly to discuss class work and shared experiences. Students in Learning Clusters may also have planned social events, field trips, or common readings.

At Western Michigan University, the Honors College Program has at least four Learning Clusters each semester. Some examples have included: Human Nature (Introduction to Biomedical Sciences, Thought and Writing, and General Psychology); Thought and Politics (Thought and Writing,

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Principles of Sociology, and Introduction to Political Science); and Information Processing (Informational Writing, Finite Mathematics with Applications, and Principles of Sociology).

Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) - The Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) are similar to Linked Courses in that they link three freshmen courses together by theme; this is especially suited for large universities because many FIGs can be offered simultaneously. FIGs are linked around academic majors and include a peer advising component where freshman can discuss course work and problems adjusting to college. Because of the weekly seminars, led by a peer advisor, faculty play a lesser role, but may be active in the FIGs by attending social events or the occasional weekly seminar.

The University of Oregon originated the FIG model out of need for academic advising assistance and building a community among freshmen in each major. Courses selected for FIGs are often foundation courses for a major and a smaller writing or communications course. Students are invited to join a FIG the summer before they start college. Some FIGs at the University of Oregon include: Pre-Law (American Government, Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics and Fundamentals of Public Speaking); Journalism-Communications: (Comparative Literature, Technology and Society, and Fundamentals of Speech Communication); Art and Architecture (Survey of the Visual Arts, Landscape, Environment and Culture, and English Composition); and Pre-Health Sciences (Biology lecture and lab, Psychology, and English Composition).

Federated Learning Communities - This model is the most complex Learning Community Model because a cohort of students takes three theme-based courses in addition to a three credit seminar taught by a Master Learner. The Master Learner is a professor from a different discipline who takes the courses and fulfills all the requirements of the classes along with the students. He or she then leads the seminar and assists students in synthesizing and exploring the opinions and points of view of students from the three courses. Faculty in Federated Learning Communities are relieved of their other teaching responsibilities.

SUNY at Stony Brook has a Federated Learning Community for upper level students majoring in psychology or biology that includes courses titled General Genetics, The Healer and the Witch in History, Philosophy and Medicine and a three-credit seminar, Social and Ethical Issues in the Life Sciences.

Coordinated Studies - In Coordinated Studies, faculty and students participate in full-time active learning based on an interdisciplinary theme. This curriculum can last an entire year and the faculty have the opportunity to redesign the entire curriculum, providing extensive professional development for faculty. Coordinated Studies provide 16 credits per semester and are team taught by several faculty members in set blocks each week. These Learning Communities are thematic and can be broad or narrow in scope. This model is most closely tied to the Meiklejohn Model.

Evergreen State College uses the Coordinated Studies Model and has themes such as: Quests (credit is given for anthropology and developmental writing); Reflections of Nature (credit is received in the visual arts, physics, biology, literature and computer science); and Science Shakes the Foundations: Dickens, Darwin, Marx, and You (classes in English composition, physical anthropology, the history of science and economics are given credits in this track).

BENEFITS

The benefits of learning communities to students are numerous but extend beyond students to faculty and the entire institution. Students involved in learning communities show an increase in academic achievement, retention, motivation, intellectual development, learning, and involvement and community. Learning communities also reinforce positive views of the institution.

Faculty that teach in learning communities reveal that they become re-energized and feel empowered. They feel as if their opinions are valued; and the rich teaching experience allows them to be creative and increases their commitment to the institution. Institutions report that learning communities draw diverse elements together toward a common goal, which improves the overall campus climate. Learning communities have proved to be a practical solution to long-standing, complex educational issues.

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